

Rumors of War

Book asserts that public schools are under attack. But the forces arrayed against them are hard to identify.

The Education Wars: A Citizen's Guide and Defense Manual by Jennifer C. Berkshire and Jack Schneider

The New Press, 2024, \$24.99; 192 pages.

As reviewed by Anna J. Egalite

THE COVER IMAGE of *The Education Wars* features a school bus with continuous tracks, akin to a military tank. It's honest advertising for a book that describes itself as a defense manual. The book jacket promises the contents will "enrage and enlighten" the reader. Inside, authors Jennifer Berkshire and Jack Schneider solemnly warn us that the forces they want us to mobilize against represent an existential threat to public education and, by extension, to democracy itself.

The shadowy figures pushing this agenda, the authors write, have "limitless faith in the free market and a cynical stand towards the very idea of the public good." These extremists, we are told, are powerful, radical ideologues who want us to focus on individual consumption instead of caring about other people's kids. And they don't just want to dismantle public education. They also favor censorship, whitewashing history, book banning, and targeting LGBTQ students and their families. If this cabal has its way, the authors aver, we'll be sent back to an era that predates the Common Schools Movement. They predict that, ultimately, the unfortunate public school students in this narrative will be left with only "a tablet and an online curriculum."

But here comes the good news. An alternative path is available to us! It's simple, really, not dark and foreboding like the authors' cautionary scenario. We just need to "fully fund" the "profoundly inclusive" public schools. Don't waste your time and energy looking at boring graphs showing that inflation-adjusted public school funding per student has risen 154 percent since 1970 (but, fine, go ahead and look at said boring graph in Figure 1). You're missing the point. You simply can't put a dollar amount on the value of fully financing the only hope that exists for restoring our fractious democracy.

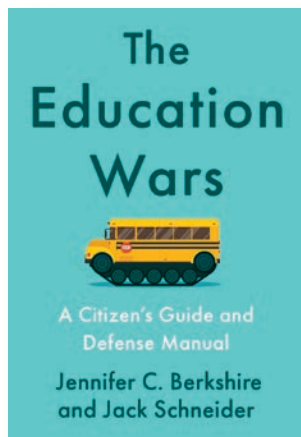
I trust you are starting to see how noble this cause is.

The book purports to serve as a guide for Americans who love their public schools and wish to survive "the present assault." Berkshire, a journalist, and Schneider, a distinguished professor of education at UMass Amherst, start with an emotive call to action. America's public schools aren't failing, the authors explain. They are just making slow progress toward a monumental goal. Then, they offer a historical perspective on the ways national political fights have been dragged into schools to stoke fear among the general public. They move into contemporary examples of how schools serve as the locus of conflict for broader societal fights over hot-button cultural issues. By their reckoning, the "ferocious push to dismantle public education" is driven by individuals who wish to attack equality itself and assault our multi-ethnic democracy.

Berkshire and Schneider spotlight many examples of small-scale, pro-public education coalitions, such as HEAL Together NC, Reclaim Idaho, and Save our Schools Arizona. They lean on research findings from the Popular Comms Institute, which recommends tailoring public messaging around a "Big Us, Small Them" story. Their advice to public school advocates is to invoke a multiracial "us," emphasizing shared values, and calling out "the deep-pocketed donors" and ideological organizations operating behind the scenes to fan the flames of the

culture wars at the local level.

The authors go on to describe actionable next steps for concerned citizens ready to reclaim education as a public good. And they counsel their fellow warriors to avoid ineffective messaging strategies in those efforts. For example, they advise against the use of condescending rhetoric that belittles other parents by describing them as ignorant or lacking in agency. They warn activists not to rely too much on facts and data, lest they feed into the perception of public school advocates as "arrogant elitists." They counsel against portraying vulnerable students solely as victims. And they encourage defenders of public education to avoid political partisanship so their appeals can reach parents in the middle of the political spectrum. That way, a victory won't be perceived as the left beating back the right. By emphasizing shared values, they write, "we end up outnumbering the right every time."



Jennifer C. Berkshire



Jack Schneider

I hate to be the skunk at a garden party, but I'm not sold on how Berkshire and Schneider have portrayed the good guys and the bad guys in this story. Their depiction of the villain is a caricature of the school choice movement that conveniently overlooks the nuanced motivations of this bipartisan and multiracial coalition. Milton Friedman gets their attention, of course, but why no mention of civil rights activist and education reformer Howard Fuller?

Likewise, the public school system that Berkshire and

for students who remained in public schools.

The thing is, there are many great public schools in this country. The kids who attend them won the life lottery by being born to a family with the means to move to a town or neighborhood that offers such schools—or their parents found a back door by navigating an open-enrollment policy or a magnet school lottery. These students are safe and happy and learning rigorous academic material and essential social skills and developing the character values that will make them great citizens. But we can't pretend this is a uniform experience. So maybe it's okay to consider tweaking the public education system to better serve the unlucky ones. After all, what kind of society coerces people into staying in an assigned public school and mandating attendance for 180 days a year, when a family is certain their child would be better served elsewhere but simply can't afford to leave? Berkshire and Schneider talk a lot about schools as community institutions, but they forget that the power of a community is derived from its members' choice to be there.

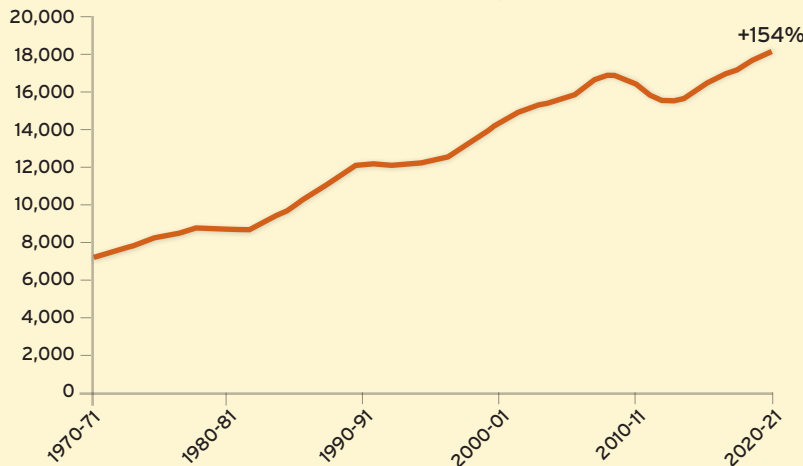
Berkshire and Schneider think they can—and should—bend the behemoth that is the public education system to suit their will. In doing so, they are making the same mistake as the culture warriors they disdain. They assume their values are superior and that their preferences, if enacted, will ensure the system finally attains a universal set of admirable goals that have been perpetually out of reach for millions of students.

The authors acknowledge that the existing system has flaws—for example, that it prompts parents to flee to affluent suburbs

The Steady Climb of Public School Funding (Figure 1)

Ignore this boring graph . . . or maybe take a peek to judge how “underfunded” public schools have been the past half century.

Inflation-Adjusted Expenditures Per Pupil, 1970 to 2020:
Percent Change



SOURCE: Digest of Education Statistics, Table 236.55

Schneider describe is an illusion. For example, they present NAEP data as “rising slowly across the decades.” That’s sort of true, if we ignore the 8th graders, whose 2022 reading scores are statistically indistinguishable from those in 1992, the first year NAEP was administered. Yes, concerned parents, it’s true that 69 percent of 8th graders are not proficient on the NAEP reading exam, but if you would just be more patient, the trends suggest that your great grandchildren have a shot at crossing that threshold! Bear with us, please.

And the potential catastrophic effects of expanding private-school choice that Berkshire and Schneider warn against are simply not borne out in the data. A rigorous longitudinal analysis of Florida’s tax credit scholarship program tracked outcomes for *public school* students as participants in the private-school choice program increased seven-fold. What consequences have arisen from 16 years of expanded private-school choice in the Sunshine State? Lower rates of suspensions and absences and higher test scores in reading and math

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where they fight to preserve school district boundaries and claim “educational larceny” if outsiders attempt to cross those lines. But problems such as this won’t be resolved by rolling back school choice policies. We must be forward-looking and ask ourselves which approach offers the greatest chance of success *now*, and for the most kids. What type of system offers the greatest incentive for self-correction? Which approach is least likely to be captured by special interests? Which approach incentivizes innovation?

Many of the objections to school choice that Berkshire and Schneider hold have potential policy solutions. And it has been demonstrated that an educational marketplace can actually foster private schools that actively support diverse families, such as the Pride School of Atlanta, which closed in 2018 when private scholarship money ran out. Furthermore, advocates who are concerned that public funds for private education are insufficient amount to little more than a subsidy for wealthy parents who can already afford private school can push for needs-based funding that provides more support to families living in poverty.

Like it or not, several red states are already moving toward a mixed-delivery model that creates a marketplace of both public and private providers. In Florida, for example, home-schooled students can use education savings account funds to buy honors biology and American history classes from their public school district, while Utah families can dip into their ESA money to access both core and elective courses in their local district. And in Arizona, students can take career and technical education courses offered by the local school district and pay the tuition with ESA funds. Over the coming years, we'll have a lot to learn from the different approaches being tried across the country.

Innovations in school choice need not compromise our societal commitment to educating all students. That's an

important shared value. Government has a useful and necessary role to play in funding and regulating education, but there's room for more flexibility in its delivery. We don't have to make a binary choice between the status quo, in which schools are both publicly funded and operated, versus a free-for-all in which bad actors can set up for-profit institutions overnight to hoodwink gullible and vulnerable families. Principled regulation can support and sustain an effective and equitable school choice marketplace. Forward-thinking governors already recognize that it's possible and even desirable to expand choice options without undermining the traditional public school system.

Americans have always been divided on the purpose of education and who should get to decide how it's delivered. Disagreement is unavoidable in a diverse society. Continuing to fight the public-education culture wars will result only in winners and losers. A true display of tolerance is not to impose your conception of "good" on all children but to allow people with different values than yours to seek out their own "good" schools.

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